

Sheep Creek East Wilderness Study Area

1. The Study Area -- 5,050 acres

The Sheep Creek East WSA (ID-111-36B) is located in Owyhee County about 100 miles southeast of Boise, Idaho. The WSA includes 5,050 acres of BLM land with no nonfederal inholdings.

About 15 percent of the WSA is bordered by primitive dirt roads and the remainder of the WSA boundary is defined by legal subdivisions, a boundary delineated to exclude livestock water developments and primitive vehicle routes from the area being considered for wilderness.

The WSA straddles Sheep Creek Canyon. The sheer-walled cliffs and talus slopes of the 600-foot deep gorge dominate the area. In the canyon depths, Sheep Creek winds its way through riparian vegetation. Sagebrush and grasses dominate the low hills and buttes of the plateau surrounding the four-mile long gorge within the WSA.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and was included in the Management Framework Plan (MFP) for the Bruneau Resource Area finalized in March 1983. The recommendation for wilderness generated through the planning process was evaluated in the Jacks Creek Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement filed in July 1989. Two alternatives were analyzed in the EIS: a no wilderness alternative where the entire 5,050 acre WSA would be released for nonwilderness uses, which is the recommendation of this report; and an all wilderness alternative.

2. Recommendation and Rationale

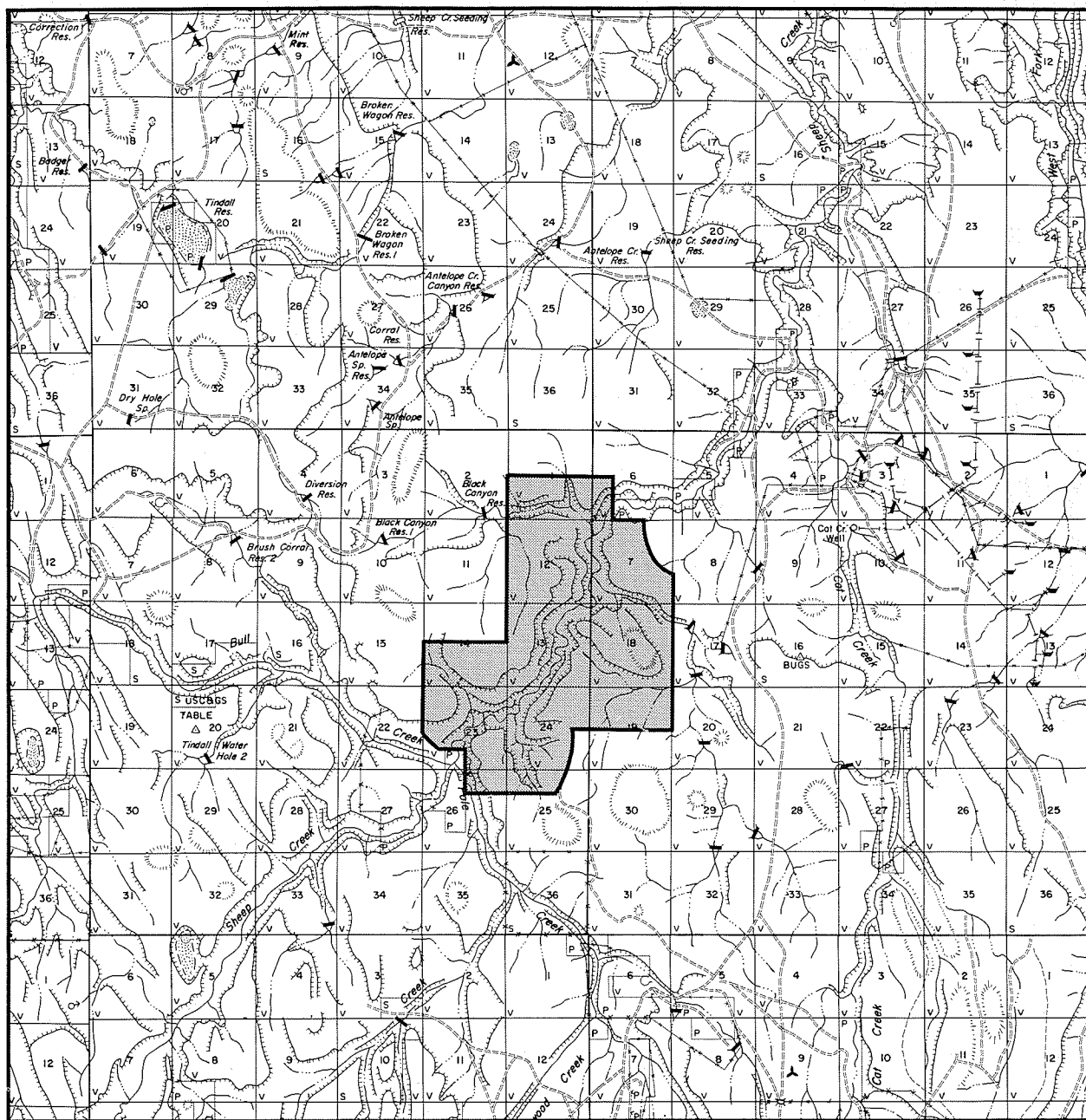
0 acres recommended for wilderness

**5,050 acres recommended for
nonwilderness**

The recommendation for the Sheep Creek East WSA is to not designate the area as wilderness, and release all 5,050 acres for other uses. The environmentally preferable alternative is the all wilderness alternative. It would cause the least change from the natural environment over the long term. The recommendation would use all practical means to avoid or minimize adverse environmental impacts. The area is shown on the Sheep Creek East Proposal map.







The quality of the wilderness values was an additional consideration in the recommendation. While the WSA contained the wilderness values necessary for study, they are not considered to merit inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. The WSA generally appears natural but there are several site-specific signs of man which impact naturalness locally. Solitude opportunities available in the WSA are similar to those afforded by thousands of acres of land adjacent to the WSA. These opportunities are due to the remoteness and lack of human activity in the area and are not due to any intrinsic values unique to the WSA. The WSA does not offer outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. There are no significant wildlife species or habitats, geologic features or scientific and educational values in the area that would benefit from wilderness designation.

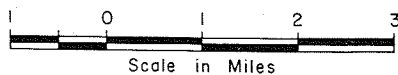
Without wilderness designation, there is the potential to increase domestic livestock grazing by an additional 198 AUMs. This increase is due to anticipated improvement in ecological condition of the vegetation over the next 20 years. The recommendation for this WSA would permit increases in grazing to occur as additional forage becomes available.



R. 4 E. | R. 5 E.

R. 5 E. | R. 6 E.

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|--------------|
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | SPLIT ESTATE |
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS |  | STATE |
|  | LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | PRIVATE |



**ID-111-36B
SHEEP CREEK EAST
PROPOSAL**

FEBRUARY 1989

**Table 1 -- Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area
SHEEP CREEK EAST**

Within Wilderness Study Area

BLM (surface and subsurface)	5,050
Split Estate (BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings (state, private)	0
Total	5,050

Within the Recommended Wilderness Boundary

BLM (within WSA)	0
BLM (outside WSA)	0
Split Estate (within WSA)	0
Split Estate (outside WSA)	0
Total BLM Land Recommended for Wilderness	0
Inholdings (state, private)	0
State land (outside WSA)	0

Within the Area Not Recommended for Wilderness

BLM	5,050
Split Estate	0
Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness	5,050
Inholdings (state, private)	0

3. Criteria Considered in Developing the Wilderness Recommendations

Wilderness Characteristics

A. Naturalness

The Sheep Creek East WSA is dominated by a 600-foot deep canyon. The WSA is predominantly natural but there are several site-specific signs of man that impact the area including a .5-mile primitive vehicle route (way).

B. Solitude

Opportunities for solitude are less than outstanding in the WSA because of the potential for visitors to concentrate along narrow corridors, the short length of the canyon and rim corridors and the lack of sufficient topographic or vegetative screening on the surrounding plateau.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

Sheep Creek East Creek WSA has outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation because of its scenic canyon, landform diversity, 6.5 miles of perennial creeks with good trout fishing and frequent opportunities to view wildlife.

The recreational attractions and scenic vistas of the canyon system are supplemented by the variety of landforms on the surrounding plateau. The flat buttes, low hills and intervening swales of the plateau provide an interesting and varying landscape for those traversing the plateau to reach the canyon. Pronghorn antelope are common on the plateau and mule deer are frequently seen in the canyon. However, there are no significant wildlife habitats, geologic features or scientific and educational values in the area that would attract a large number of visitors to the area.

D. Special Features

There are no special features in the WSA. The 600-foot deep canyon of Sheep Creek is a scenic chasm bisecting the rolling sagebrush plateaus of the WSA. However, the canyon in the adjacent Sheep Creek West WSA, an area recommended for wilderness designation, is more spectacular.

Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System

A. Assessing the Diversity of Natural Systems and Features as Represented by Ecosystems

Wilderness designation would not add a new ecosystem to the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS); however, it would add a landform and vegetative type not presently represented in the Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem. This ecosystem is represented by three designated areas with 76,699 acres. There are 35 other BLM areas in the state under study with this ecosystem. This information is summarized on Table 2.

TABLE 2
Ecosystem Representation

Bailey-Kuchler Classification	<u>NWPS Areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
Dry Domain/Intermountain Sagebrush Province (Sheep Creek East)				
	<u>NATIONWIDE</u>			
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	3	76,699	136	4,359,340
	<u>IDAHO</u>			
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	1	12,997	35	949,916
	<u>NEVADA</u>			
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	1	32,407	29	1,273,919
	<u>CALIFORNIA</u>			
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	0	0	5	152,431
	<u>OREGON</u>			
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	0	0	67	1,983,074

**B. Expanding the Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive Recreation
Within a Day's Driving Time (Five Hours) of Major Population Centers**

The Sheep Creek East WSA is within a five-hour drive from Boise, Idaho. Table 3 summarizes the number and acreage of designated areas and other BLM study areas within a five-hour drive of the population center.

Table 3
**Wilderness Opportunities for Residents
of Major Population Centers**

Population Centers	<u>NWPS Areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
Boise, Idaho	16	4,741,570	141	5,374,250

C. Balancing the Geographic Distribution of Wilderness Areas

The Sheep Creek East WSA would not add significantly to the geographical distribution of areas within the NWPS. Regionally, the WSA would add a desert canyon and plateau area not found in designated wilderness and would help to balance opportunities to attain diverse wilderness experiences.

Manageability

It would be difficult to manage the WSA in the long term to maintain its outstanding primitive recreation opportunities. The WSA does not have outstanding opportunities for solitude.

The majority of recreation use in this WSA is expected to be concentrated in the four-mile long canyon of Sheep Creek and on the rims adjacent to the canyons. The relatively short length of these travel corridors (four to six miles) limits the number of groups that could visit the area without frequently encountering other visitors. Satisfactory primitive recreation experiences are dependent on maintaining some opportunities for solitude. Primitive recreation is not outstanding if visitors are constantly encountering other groups. In the long term, it could be necessary to regulate and limit the recreation use to maintain opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation.

Energy and Minerals Resource Values

An assessment of the mineral potential was done under the Geology, Mineral and Energy contract. There are no known mineral or energy resources in the WSA and geologic environments are not favorable for the discovery of significant marketable energy or mineral resources. There are no known mining claims or mineral leases within the WSA.

Impacts on Resources

The following comparative impact table summarizes the effects on pertinent resources for all the alternatives considered including designation or nondesignation of the entire area as wilderness.

Table 4

**Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative
WSA ID-111-36B (SHEEP CREEK EAST)**

ISSUE TOPICS	PROPOSED ACTION (NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE)	ALL WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Impacts on Wilderness Values	(5,050 acres) Opportunities for solitude could be slightly diminished in Sheep Creek Canyon as recreation use increases.	(4,050 acres) Naturalness and opportunities for solitude\primitive recreation would be enhanced on about 5 acres affected by road closures. Opportunities for solitude could be slightly diminished in Sheep Creek Canyon as recreation use increases.
Impacts on Recreation Use	Annual recreation use would be about 200 visitor days, an increase of about 150 annual visitor days over current use. Opportunities to participate in ORV use or hunting would not be affected.	Annual recreation use would be about 200 visitor days, an increase of 150 annual visitor days over current use. There would be no significant impact on opportunities to participate in ORV use or hunting.
Impacts on Selected Wildlife Species	Mule deer would increase up to 5%. Pronghorn would increase up to 5%. Sage grouse would increase up to 10%.	Mule deer would increase up to 5%. Pronghorn would increase up to 5%. Sage grouse would increase up to 10%.
Impacts on Income and Jobs	There would be \$6,803 of additional annual income and .4 new jobs. There would be no implementation costs.	There would be \$4,105 of additional annual income and .3 new jobs. Implementation costs would be \$5,500 annually for wilderness management.

Local Social and Economic Considerations

Nondesignation or designation of the entire Sheep Creek East WSA or any portion of the WSA as wilderness would have no significant social or economic effects on Owyhee County.

Summary of WSA-Specific Public Comments

Public involvement has occurred throughout the wilderness review process. Certain comments received during the inventory process and early stages of the EIS preparation were used to develop significant study issues and various alternatives for the ultimate management of those lands found to have wilderness values.

During the wilderness inventory for the Sheep Creek East roadless unit, 13 public commenters supported establishing a WSA and one opposed it. Reasons cited among those who supported establishment of a WSA were the area's outstanding opportunities for solitude (seven comments), spectacular scenery (five comments), and opportunities for hiking and backpacking (three comments). The comment opposing designation of the WSA stated the area lacked naturalness and outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation or solitude.

During the public review of the Bruneau MFP, all 30 comments supported wilderness designation. Proponents of wilderness cited the following reasons: the area's exceptional scenic values (ten comments); potential bighorn sheep habitat (nine comments); and potential ecological values (seven comments).

During the public review of the Draft Jacks Creek Wilderness EIS, 151 written and oral comments addressing this WSA were received. Public hearings were held in Boise and Grand View, Idaho. Eighty-four commenters supported wilderness designation for all of the WSA, 41 commenters supported no wilderness for the WSA, while 26 commenters took no formal position on wilderness designation.

Among those supporting wilderness, 80 percent were Idaho residents with a majority from Ada County; 12 percent were from other western states; and eight percent were residents of eastern states. The most prevalent reasons cited for wilderness designation were preservation of wildlife habitat, and protection of pristine high desert ecosystems. Other reasons in support of wilderness were to provide primitive recreation opportunities and solitude, to preserve scenic quality, and to maximize protection of fisheries and riparian habitat. Twelve wilderness supporters pointed out that wilderness designation would have minimal resource conflicts with other resource uses.

About 85 percent of the comments opposing wilderness designation were from local residents with about 40 percent from Owyhee County, 35 percent from Ada County, and ten percent from Canyon and Elmore Counties. The remaining 15 percent were from residents of other western states. Twenty-two of these commenters believe that wilderness designation would discriminate against senior citizens and the handicapped. Other reasons for opposing wilderness were wilderness is not effective management (too inflexible and costly), wilderness is not multiple use, Idaho has enough wilderness, wilderness values do not need wilderness designation for protection, wilderness would close the door to future oil and gas exploration work.

Several agencies commented on the Draft EIS. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and the Owyhee County Commissioners supported no wilderness designation. The Department of the Air Force supported designation of the entire WSA as wilderness. The Federal Aviation Agency, Environmental Protection Agency and the Idaho State Historical Society commented on the DEIS but did not express an alternative preference.